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*The EXCELLENCY of the
Christian Ministration.*

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S E R M O N

Preached before the
Sons of the CLERGY,
AT THEIR
ANNIVERSARY MEETING
IN THE
Cathedral Church of St. Paul,
FEBR. I. 1732.

By **HENRY STEBBING D. D.**
Chaplain in Ordinary to HIS MAJESTY, and Preacher
to the Honourable Society of *Grays-Inn.*

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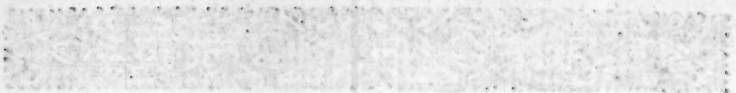
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STEWARDS for the late Feast
of the Sons of the CLERGY;

This DISCOURSE, Preached and Printed at their
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HENRY STEBBING.



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The Discourses, Preached and Printed at their
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HENRY STURDING



2 COR. III. 9.

*For if the Ministration of Condemnation be glory,
much more doth the Ministration of Righteousness
exceed in Glory.*

THE Apostle, a little before, having occasionally mentioned the Diligence and Fidelity with which he and his Fellow-Apostles had preached the Gospel, immediately corrects himself in the Style and Address of one who thought that he had very little occasion to say any thing in justification of his own Conduct. *Do we begin again to commend ourselves? That is, Have we any need again to commend ourselves? No. Or need we, as some others, Epistles of Commendation to you, or Letters of Commendation from you? That is, Do we want to have our good Behaviour attested in form, by the methods usual in such Cases? Nor this. Why? It follows in the next Words, Ye are our Epistle, written in our Hearts, or (which per-*
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haps is the truer reading) ye are our Epistle written in * *your Hearts*; as if he had said, "Ye are *to yourselves* our Epistle." The Fruits of our Labours which ye experience within yourselves, are to you the most effectual Commendation of our Ministry that can be given. To you therefore *from others*, there can be no need of Letters of Commendation. Nor is there need of such Letters *from you to others*, seeing that self-same Epistle written in your Hearts, is also *known and read of all Men, manifestly declared to be the Epistle of Christ, ministred by us, written not with Ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in Tables of Stone, but in the fleshy Tables of the Heart.* ver. 1, 2, 3. The meaning of which passage is this; That the Conversion of the *Corinthians* to the Christian Faith was so publick an example, that *virtually and in effect* it was not only a Commendation from them, but a Testimony also from Christ himself to their Ministry, by whose Power and Spirit they were qualified for this great and excellent Work. For this is what the Apostle presently subjoins; *Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves, but our Sufficiency is of God, who hath also made us able Ministers of the New Testament.* ver. 5, 6.

* Some Copies have it *ap̄r. vid. Millium.*

This observ'd, he goes on to set forth the Excellency of the Evangelical Dispensation. We are *Ministers* (says he) *of the New Testament, not of the Letter, but of the Spirit; for the Letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth Life.* The Sense of which Words will receive some light from the following Verses; *If the Ministration of Death, written and engraven in Stones, was glorious, so that the Children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the Face of Moses for the Glory of his Countenance, which Glory was to be done away; how shall not the Ministration of the Spirit be rather glorious? For if the Ministration of Condemnation be Glory, much more doth the Ministration of Righteousness exceed in Glory.* It is plain here, that these Phrases, the Ministration of the Letter, the Ministration of Death, the Ministration of Condemnation, signify one and the same thing, to wit, the Promulgation of the Law, considered merely as a Law, or as abstracted from the Grace of Pardon and Reconciliation offered by the Gospel. In opposition to which stands the Ministration of the Spirit, and the Ministration of Righteousness, or Justification, which therefore denotes the Gospel declaring Acceptance to repenting Sinners. The Law is the Ministration of Death and Condemnation in this sense, that shewing Men their Duty, it became by Transgression the occasion of Death and Condemnation, as St. Paul him-

self clearly explains this point in another place. *I had not known Sin but by the Law; for I had not known Lust except the Law had said, Thou shalt not covet* *. I had not known Sin, i. e. I could not have been guilty of Sin but for the Law, for *where there is no Law there is no Transgression* †. But the Law given, what followed? Why, *Sin taking occasion by the Commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence; and the Commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death* ‖. It was thus that *the Law wrought wrath* ‡; thus that the Ministration of *the Letter* was the Ministration of *Condemnation*. And how is the Gospel (the Ministration of *the Spirit*) the Ministration of *Justification*? Why, as it holds forth those Assurances of Reconciliation to Sinners, which the Law could not give. For thus speaks the same Apostle; *The Law of the Spirit of Life in Jesus Christ hath made me free from the Law of Sin and Death*. For what the Law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful Flesh, hath effected; and for Sin, (i. e. by a Sacrifice for Sin) hath condemned Sin in the flesh, that the Righteousness of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after

* Rom. vii. 7. † Chap. iv. 150 || Chap. vii. 8, 10.

* Rom. vii. 7. † Chap. iv. 150 || Chap. vii. 8, 10.

the Flesh, but after the Spirit. For such there is now no Condemnation. Rom. viii. 1--4.

From the Words thus explained, there will arise two Points very fit to be spoken to at this Time; namely,

First, What is the proper Work of a Christian Minister.

Secondly, Its Use and Excellency.

These particulars I shall consider; and conclude with a brief Application to the Occasion of our present Meeting.

First, What is the proper Work of a Christian Minister: which is various, according to the Variety of Means which the Scripture recommends as necessary or expedient to set forward the Faith and Obedience of the Gospel. At present I shall consider the Christian Clergy only under the Notion of *Teachers*: In which view it is plain that their Office is to call Men to Repentance, by declaring Pardon and Acceptance to all that believe, in and thro' the Blood of Jesus Christ. This it is *properly* to *preach the Gospel*, for these are *the glad tidings of great joy to all People*, that Jesus Christ is the Sa-
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viour of the World, and that by the Sacrifice of his Death, all who repent shall be justified from those Transgressions, from which by the Law they could not be justified. It is well worth observing how closely the first Preachers of Christ adhered to this great and important Lesson. Upon St. Peter's first Sermon at the Day of Pentecost, when by the miraculous Descent of the Holy Ghost, their general Commission was opened to *go into all the World, and preach the Gospel to every Creature; when they that heard it were pricked in their heart, and said unto the Apostles, Men and Brethren, what shall we do?* The Answer was, *Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of Sins.* Acts ii. 38. So chap. iii. ver. 12. where the same Apostle having taken occasion, from the Cure of the lame Man, to bear witness to the Jews of the Power and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, whom they had wickedly crucified and slain, he comforts them at last with these Words, as the Burden of the Message he had to deliver to them, *Repent ye and be converted, that your Sins may be blotted out;* putting them in mind that they were *the Children of the Covenant which God made with their Fathers, — who had sent Jesus to bless them in turning away every one of them from their Iniquities.* There would be no end if I should set down every particular

ticular instance at large. Read over the Acts of the Apostles, and what will you find? Why, this --- *Jesus of Nazareth*, --- *whom God raised from the dead* --- *is become the head Stone of the corner; neither is there Salvation in any other: for there is none other name under Heaven given among Men whereby we must be saved*, chap. iv. 10. --- *The God of our Fathers raised up Jesus* --- *to be a Prince and a Saviour for to give Repentance to Israel and forgiveness of Sins*. chap. v. 30. --- *God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with Power* --- *and raised him up the third day* --- *and commanded us to preach unto the People, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead. To him give all the Prophets witness, that whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of Sins*. chap. x. 38. --- *of David's Seed hath God according to his promise raised unto Israel a Saviour Jesus*. --- *And we declare unto you glad Tidings, how that the Promise which was made unto the Fathers, God hath fulfilled this same unto us their Children, in that he hath raised up Jesus*. --- *Be it known unto you therefore, Men and Brethren, that through this Man is preached unto you the forgiveness of Sins, and by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which they could not be justified by the Law of Moses*. chap. xiii. 23. This was their constant

stant Testimony to the *Jews*. And to the *Gentiles* they apply themselves exactly in the same strain; for thus it follows, --- *We preach unto you that ye should turn from these Vanities unto the living God, which made Heaven and Earth, and the Sea, and all things that are therein. Who in time past suffered all Nations to walk in their own ways--but now commandeth all Men every where to repent; because he hath appointed a Day in which he will judge the World in righteousness, by that Man whom he hath ordained, whereof he hath given Assurance unto all Men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.* chap. xiv. 15. and xvii. 30. And when St. Paul took his last leave of the *Elders of Ephesus*, to whom he had preached for the space of three Years, and from whom he declared he had kept back nothing that was profitable unto them, he summ'd up the whole of his Preaching in these few, but comprehensive Words; *Repentance toward God, and Faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ*; chap. xx. 21.

What I intend by this Observation is only to shew the true and proper distinction between a *Heathen Moralist* and a *Christian Teacher*. Reason speaks in this wise; *God made the World and all things therein; and there is a Law to which we are all subject as his Creatures.* And in the proof
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and Explanation of these things lies the proper Work and Business of a *Philosopher*. Christianity sets out exactly where Philosophy ends, and (the Law supposed) says, *Ye are all Sinners, ye are all condemned by the Law, repent ye therefore and believe in Jesus, that your Sins may be forgiven.* This is the reason why there is in the New Testament so little use of *Argument* to prove that *there is a God*, and that *He is to be worshipped*; and that Men are bound to be *sober, honest*, and the like. The Apostles constantly *presuppose* these, as Principles already known and understood, or which by unbiaſſed and uncorrupted Reason, *might* be known and understood; and therefore instead of shewing the *Righteousness* of the Law, as Persons under Commission from God they *declare* the Law, and invite Men to the Obedience of it, by setting before them *the Riches of the Mercy and Goodness of God*, vouchsafed them in and through Jesus Christ. This is the proper *Work of an Evangelist*, to *declare* the Law to Sinners, and the Conditions of Pardon to all who will accept them, under the *Seal of the divine Authority*; which St. Paul intimates to us in that remarkable passage, 1 Cor. ii. 1, 2. *And I, Brethren, when I came unto you, came not with excellency of Speech or of Wisdom, declaring unto you the Testimony of God; for I determined not to know any thing among you save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.* That is, he

had no other Business than to make known to them the gracious Purpose of God, to save Sinners by the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Good cause then was there why he should not come to them with *excellency of Speech and Wisdom*; why he should not *reason and dispute* with them like a *Philosopher*; since the most excellent Wisdom could not reach unto this Knowledge, that Jesus the Son of God by offering himself a Sacrifice upon the Cross, should be *unto us Righteousness and Sanctification and Redemption**. This he tells us is *the Wisdom of God in a Mystery*†, and consequently was not capable of being proved any other way than *by the Demonstration of the Spirit*‡, i. e. by the miraculous Gifts of the Holy Ghost, the proper Evidence of his Mission. Now that which was an Evidence of his bearing Commission from God, to declare Pardon to Sinners through the Blood of Christ, was at the same time a Confirmation of the Law to which he exhorted them to return by Repentance, superior to all *human reasoning*; and therefore with respect to *both*, the Apostle might well tell the *Corinthians* that their Faith *stood not in the Wisdom of Men, but in the Power of God*§.

We see then plainly what was the Business of the first Preachers of the Gospel. And what was

* Chap. i. ver. 30. † Chap. ii. ver. 7. ‡ *Id.* ver. 4. § *Id.* ver. 5.

their Business *then* is ours *now*; for the Nature of the Christian Ministry changeth not. It was *theirs* to declare the Law from which we have swerved, and the offers of Pardon to repenting Sinners thro' Christ, *under the Authority of God*. It is *ours* to do the same; since the *Evidence* of this Authority is conveyed to us by the *Scriptures*, which are a standing Record both of the Doctrines they taught, and of the Miracles which they wrought to give proof of their Mission. Here it is that we place our main Strength; Hither that we appeal when a Reason is demanded, Why we *thus preach*, why we *thus believe*? If the Question is, *What is the Law*? Our Answer is, Go to the Scriptures, there you will find it. If it be, *What must Sinners do to be saved*? Our Answer is still the same, The Scriptures declare it. Not that it is a Disparagement to a Christian Minister to enter sometimes into a Defence of *Natural Religion* upon *Natural Principles*, or to shew the *Consistency* of the Gospel Doctrines, relating to our *Redemption by Christ*, with the Dictates of right Reason. St. Paul exhorts us to *become all things to all Men, if by any means we may save some**. And if Christianity is attacked upon Natural Principles, it must be defended (so far as the Defence will go) upon Natural Principles. But whenever we do this, we act,

* 1 Cor. ix. 21.

strictly and properly as *Philosophers*, not as the *Ministers of Christ*, who, *as such*, must ever themselves be determined by the Authority of Christ, and apply to others in the Name of Christ. The two Characters, though different, are yet very consistent, and may very usefully be joined together, but the one should never be suffered to destroy the other. If we are called upon to defend Natural Religion, we are not to stop there, nor think that we have discharged our Duties as Ministers of the Spirit, by shewing ourselves *able Ministers of the Letter*: By giving forth elaborate Systems of *mortal Science*, without being mindful to acquaint our Hearers of how little avail are our most splendid Virtues, till made effectual by the Blood of Christ, and sanctified by the Grace offered in the Gospel. And if the Dispute lies between Reason and Revelation in Points not *contradictory* to Reason (which can never be) but, purely *incomprehensible* to Reason, we should at all times remember what St. Paul saith, *Beware lest any Man spoil you through Philosophy and vain Deceit after the Tradition of Men, after the Rudiments of the World, and not after Christ* †. The single Point before us is, Hath Christ said it, or hath he not? If he hath said it, we, as the Ministers of Christ, are bound to teach it; and ye, as the Disciples of Christ, are

† Coloss. ii. 8.

bound to receive it. And whether he hath or hath not, we know of no other Rule but *the Word of God*, which, with us is and ought to be, the beginning and end of all, *the Pillar and Ground of Truth*†.

Having said thus much concerning the Nature of the Christian Ministry, I proceed now,

Secondly, To shew its Use and Excellency; its Use, I say, considered *specially* as the Ministry of Christ, distinguished from all Teaching *purely human*. The end of all Instruction is to reform the World; but if the Question be asked, Who is best qualified for this Work, the *Heathen Moralist*, or the *Minister of Christ*? a Difference there will appear to the advantage of the latter, beyond the reach of Dispute or Contradiction. For what can the Philosopher do? Let us suppose him (which is a very bountiful concession) perfectly instructed in the Natural Law; he can shew you nothing *but* the Law; That very Law against which we are all Sinners, and by which we stand condemned in the sight of God. If you should ask (a Question which no Man can avoid asking) *What must we do to be saved*? How shall we reconcile our selves to God, and obtain Pardon for our past Offences, and for

† 1 Tim. iii. 15.

our Offences yet to come? He has no Answer to give which the Reason of Man can securely trust to. But the Minister of Jesus Christ brings the Grant of Pardon in his hand, open and legible to all, under *his* Seal in whom *alone* the Power of Forgiveness rests. And what a mighty encouragement is it to Repentance to have such ample, undoubted Assurances of its Worth and Value as the Gospel gives? Is it not in all Cases true, that we are diligent and industrious, in proportion to the Greatness and Certainty of the Recompence that lies before us? And must not then the Gospel be a more prevailing Motive to Repentance, in proportion as the Grant of Pardon by it becomes more ample and more secure?—But lay this Consideration aside, and take the thing in another light. Let it be supposed that the Philosopher could set forth both the Law and the Grant of Pardon; yet who, is it likely, would most gain the Attention of Men, and enforce the Truth with greatest Weight and Efficacy, *Plato* by his Reasoning, *Cicero* by his Eloquence, or *St. Paul* by his plain Speech, attended with the *Demonstration of the Spirit and Power*? This Point has been once tried; *Plato* was read, *Cicero* was read, and both were admired by all who had a Taste for Sense and Learning; and yet the World in general was nothing mended. But no sooner did the Apostles appear in the Power and Spirit

Spirit of Christ, than Idolatry fled before them, as Darkneſs diſappears at the riſing of the Sun, and the *whole Earth* became *filled with the Knowledge of God as the Waters cover the Sea*. It is recorded *Acts ii. 41.* that *St. Peter* by one Sermon converted *three thousand Souls* in *one Day*. Does Hea-then Story afford us any ſuch Example? The Reaſon of the Difference is plain; the Philoſophers came in *their own Name*, the Apoſtles in the Name of *God*. The Philoſophers explained the Law according to the Meaſure of their own Underſtandings; the Apoſtles, though they only *declared* the Law, yet it was by the Authority of him who gave the Law, whoſe Preſence was viſible among them, by the Signs and Wonders wrought by their Hands. *Man* may ſpeak and be diſregarded, but ſhall *God* ſpeak and not be heard? The Miracles wrought by the Apoſtles were *dreadful* and *astonishing*, and therefore a proper Application to thoſe who wanted not ſo much to be *convinced*, as to be *awakened* into Attention. And though it be true that Miracles are not now wrought before our Eyes, yet the Miracles *then* wrought are ſtill the ſame Evidence of the Preſence of God with the Apoſtles, authorizing and confirming that Voice by which they call upon us in the Scriptures, to repent and believe in Jeſus Chriſt that we may be ſaved. And this is that which will perpetually give to the Miniſters of

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Christ an Advantage above *mere Moralists*, that they offer a System which sets forth the whole Duty of Man and the Doctrines of Salvation, with great Plainness, under such *Authority* as none can dispute, or lightly esteem. I would be very loth the Experiment should be made, but no doubt the Difference would soon be felt, if you should take away from the common People their *Bibles*, and put into their hands in their stead, *Aristotle's Ethics* or *Wollaston's Delineation*. Men of Sense and Leisure will find both Entertainment and Improvement by such Books as these, which are excellent and admirable in their kind; but what do you think of the bulk of Mankind? Will *they* not be more profited by reading the *ten Commandments*, our Saviour's *Sermon on the Mount*, or such plain instructive Lessons of Morality as are to be met with every where in the *Gospels* and *Epistles*; enforced by the Threatnings of God's Wrath against Sinners, and the comfortable Assurances of Mercy to those who repent, through the Propitiation of our Redeemer Jesus Christ: Will not, I say, this more help to reform a bad World (whilst what they read they believe to come from the Mouth of God himself) than all the Systems of *human Philosophy* put together? Now this is our Business, to lead Men to the Scriptures as the Rule of their Lives, and the Foundation of their Hopes; to support their just Credit and Authority among the People as *the*
I Word

Word of God; from thence to gather and dispenſe thoſe Stores which the Weak are not *able* to gather for themſelves, and which the *Careleſs* and the *Busy* would be apt to *overlook*; to *inſtruct*, *rebuke*, and *exhort*, with all *Patience* and *Long-ſuffering*, that the *Wiſe* and the *Unwiſe*, the *Weak*, and the *Strong*, all Men every where who will hear and be perſuaded, may reap the bleſſed *Fruits of Righteouſneſs, Peace, and Joy in the Holy Ghoſt*. How much then would the World be the better for it, if Chriſtianity ſhould be aboliſhed, and Heatheniſm ſet up again in its room? Or why thoſe heavy Complaints againſt the Chriſtian Clergy, which are ſo often heard in our Streets? Mark from whom theſe Complaints come, and you may gueſs the Reason. *Such* they are, who, if *we* were to be answerable for the Folly and the Perverſeneſs of Men, would *themſelves* be the greateſt Shame and Reproach to our Miniſtry. Into thoſe dregs of Times are we fallen, that the plaineſt Points of Morality are called in queſtion! Repentance is made void, by denying the Diſtinction between Good and Evil! Faith in God is treated as mere Credulity and Folly! The Reſurrection and a future Judgment, are laughed at as idle Tales! And the whole human Race ſet forth as made for nothing elſe, but to ſport and wanton themſelves in Luſt and Pleaſure *! Do Men want *Miracles* to convince them that they are not *Beaſts*? Do they want *Reasoning*?—Neither the one nor the other

* See the Philoſophical Diſſertation on Death.

will avail, with those who have set themselves at defiance to common Sense. Such as these were never converted by Christ or his Apostles; and what then can be expected from us? Are we, when we should be *going on to Perfection*, to be *laying again Foundations*? Are we to be diverted from applying ourselves to the *Meek* and the *Lowly*; from cultivating the *good* and *fruitful* Soil (where our Labour will always be paid with ample Increase) to dig among Rocks and Stones; to speak to those, who *having Ears will not hear, and having Hearts will not understand*? In these Points every thing has been done which is necessary to satisfy reasonable Men. And if all the Help we *can* give proves fruitless and vain, we know the last method prescribed in this Case; we are to *shake off the Dust of our Feet as a Testimony against them*; and leave them to that dreadful Doom which the Gospel reads them, *It shall be more tolerable for the Land of Sodom and Gomorrah at the Day of Judgment than for them.*

I have not time to say much to you by way of Application, and I persuade myself that much is not needful to be said. What calls us together is Charity; in itself the most excellent of all Christian Vertues, and not lessened, I hope, by this special Circumstance, that it is also a REMEMBRANCE *of those who have spoken unto you the Word of God**; who have been the Instruments of converting Souls, and diffusing the

* Heb. xiii. 7.

Gospel-Light to every Corner of our Land. It is a Saying of the blessed St. Paul, *If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great matter if we shall reap your carnal things†?* These have sown, but what have they reaped? I will not enter into Complaints upon this Subject---Let their Widows and their Orphans speak! This only permit me to say, that *what has been lacking* to the Husbands and the Fathers of these unhappy Sufferers, should, in some sort, be made good to their Families, that the *Bowels* of those who inherit the Husband's and the Father's Poverty, may *be refreshed*, for the Husband's and the Father's sake. Numerous are the Objects of your Charity, and small therefore must be the Gift, when compared with the Occasions of many who receive it. But if here is not a *Sufficiency* for all, here is some *help* for all; and a Help it is that brings *Honour* with it as well as *Relief*. It is an honourable Testimony to our Order, that our Poverty was thought worthy of the Assistance of the CROWN, by whose Favour this Corporation subsists; and it ought ever to be remembred with Gratitude, how much this Charity owes to the Munificence of our Gracious QUEEN, of whose Bounty we may justly boast; for it was a Benefit, not only as it brought Relief to our Poor, but as it was the Evidence of HER Approbation of this good Work: And so long as it shall meet with Encouragement from the Great, the Wise, and the Good, and each Year's return shall call together this

† 1 Cor. ix. 11.

venerable Assembly, where the *Rich* and the *Noble* pour in their Free-will Offerings with a large and bounteous hand; the meanest of us can never want Cause to bear with Patience the Reproaches of a bad World, nor to have Hope in God, who by many unforeseen, unexpected Ways, doth constantly provide for us. It is worthy your Observation, that tho' the Amount of our yearly Pension exceeds the Revenues of our Estates by near fifteen hundred Pounds, the Corporation has never yet found it necessary to shorten her hand, the good Providence of God having perpetually supplied that Defect by *casual* Benefactions! May we go on to act always with the same *Trust*, and with the same *Success*! And may we (as we ought) receive this gracious Goodness of God, as a comfortable Earnest of that infinitely greater and more excellent Reward, which yet rests in his hand, to come forth at the great Day of Account; upon *us*, if we shall be found faithful; upon *our Families*, if they shall adorn the Lowliness of their Condition with a contented and an humble Mind; and upon *all* who are helpful in carrying on this *Work of Love*; relying on his Promise who hath said, *Whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones, a Cup of cold Water only, in the name of a Disciple---He shall in no wise lose his Reward.* Matt. x. 42.

Now to God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, be all Honour and Glory, both now and for evermore.

Amen.

F I N I S.